Fear of Death

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If you’ve ever observed your own mind as you fall asleep, you’ll notice that you begin to lose your sense of the body, and an image will appear of a place or a thing, and you go for it. That’s the process of what they call “becoming and birth.” The appearance of the image of the place, that’s the becoming, and then going into it, that’s the birth. The same thing happens as you die. The big difference, of course, is that you’re going to be pushed out of the body. You can’t stay here anymore. When you’re sleeping, you voluntarily lose your sense of the body. No problem, because you have a strong sense that you’ll be coming back. But at death, you know you won’t be coming back. That’s why there’s a lot of fear. The Buddha said there are four reasons why we fear death. We don’t want to lose the body. We don’t want to lose our sensual pleasures of the human life. We’ve realized that we’ve done unskillful and cruel things in life, and we’re afraid of some sort of punishment. And we haven’t seen the true Dhamma. In other words, we haven’t realized that there is a deathless element of the mind that will not be affected by the death of the body. Of those four fears, one of them can be alleviated by the practice of generosity and virtue. That’s the fear that should be eliminated. You shouldn’t be punished for cruel behavior. People who come back from near-death experiences often say that the things they regret most are when they look back on their lives, thinking that they’re about to die. The things they regret most are opportunities that could have helped someone else, been kind to someone else, but they didn’t. So if you’re generous with others and have some restraint in your behavior–no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants, no divisive speech, no ill will–then as you look back on your life, you realize there’s nothing you have to reproach yourself for, nothing you have to be afraid of, that you’re going to be punished for. That’s one fear that can be alleviated by generosity and virtue. The other fears, though, have to be dealt with by meditation. Meditation is the only thing that can get you past them. Our attachment to sensuality is such that if we don’t have a higher pleasure, we’re going to go back to it. As the Buddha said, even if you see the drawbacks of sensuality—your fascination with thinking about sensual pleasure, sensual plans, how much you’re going to enjoy this, how much you’re going to enjoy that, and how much you enjoyed stuff afterwards—even though you see the drawbacks that can come from being obsessed with that kind of thing, you’re going to keep coming back to it, unless you have a higher pleasure. This is why we try to get a sense of well-being, the pleasure and rapture that come as you get the mind in the right concentration, to begin to realize sensual pleasure and your fascination with sensual thoughts. It really isn’t that satisfying. It’s like eating a lot of potato chips. The more you eat, the hungrier you get, but then you never really get satisfied. So this is one of the reasons why we work on adjusting the breath, taking the sense of well-being that comes from the breathing and spreading it around the body. Turn it into pleasure. This pleasure that we have in the meditation is called the pleasure of form. It’s not a sensual pleasure. It’s the pleasure of being able to inhabit your body with a sense of well-being. So it can help alleviate your fear of missing out on human sensual pleasures. But then there’s the attachment to the body itself. Here again, meditation helps, either through the contemplation of the parts of the body, which you take apart and say, “Okay, which part of the body here really is you? Are you the brain? Are you the heart? Are you the lungs? Are you the eyes?” There’ll be a part of the mind that says, “Yes.” But when you think about it, really, it’s not the case. Then you look at the individual parts. If you take them out, there’ll be nothing there that you would want to identify with. So why are we so attached? Well, it’s because we fear that without the body there’ll be no consciousness. Here again, meditation can help. If you can get the mind really still, to the point where the breath stops, you begin to notice that the sense of the boundary of the body begins to dissolve away. And you think of the space filling the body, the space all around you. And if you can get comfortable with that perception, not having to have a perception of body, it can give you an inkling that, yes, it is possible for the mind to survive without the body. It’s not proof. But at least you get more comfortable with the idea of not having to depend on the body and being able to let the sense of the body dissolve away. It’s that last fear, realizing that you haven’t seen the true Dhamma. When you overcome that, by your first taste of awakening, you realize there is a deathless. And it can be touched with the mind, and it can be touched through our efforts. Our efforts don’t cause it, of course, because if our efforts caused it, then it wouldn’t be deathless. But they can take us there, like the road to a mountain. The road doesn’t cause the mountain, but following the road gets you to the mountain. When you’ve seen the mountain, then you realize, okay, that you don’t have to live in the marshes and bogs anymore. You look back at the body and you realize, okay, it’s not you. And your awareness doesn’t have to depend on it. You’ve got proof of that now. That’s the point where you can overcome your fear of death. But even prior to that point, meditation gives you a lot of skills you’re going to need as death comes. Because things will appear to the mind. You realize, “I can’t stay here anymore in the body.” It’s pushing you out. Then the mind’s response is to think of various places to go. I was electrocuted one time years back. I thought I was going to die. My sense of the time that I was being electrocuted was about five minutes. People who saw it said it was just a split second. It made me realize that my mind sped up. I realized, “Where am I going to go now?” In desperation, it looks for all opportunities. But if you have wits about you, you say, “Wait a minute. I’ve dealt with this kind of thing before. Things come to the mind and you don’t want to go there.” Well, it’s like when you’re meditating. A distracting thought comes up and you learn how not to go for it. This puts you in more and more control. This keeps reminding you, “I have choices.” That’s going to help you an awful lot at that point. And where have you learned that? You’ve learned that through the meditation. You’ve learned how to turn off thoughts, breathe through them, let them disintegrate. Not let them take over. Don’t go into every thought that comes your way. The question sometimes arises, “Do we have free will?” You have more freedom the more you train the mind. Some people have more freedom than others because they’ve trained the mind. And here’s your opportunity. If you don’t think you have any choices, you won’t have any choices. You’ll go for the first thing that comes, whatever your karma churns up. And that can be karma in this lifetime, karma in some previous lifetime, you never really know. But if you realize, “I have choices,” you stay with that sense of awareness. Pains will come since you can’t stay in the body, but you can hold on to that awareness, just the awareness in and of itself. At the very least, you can choose good places to go, choose a place that offers the opportunity to practice. It’s a strange thing about some of these worlds that appear in the mind. You can have just a bare glimpse of them, but you know an awful lot that can convey an awful lot of information. So that’s the information you’re looking for. That’s the place to practice. Continue the practice. Go for that. Don’t try to hold on to the body. Because if you do, you’ll be hovering around the body afterwards. Jon Foon sometimes would be going out for a little walk in the evening at Wat Makut, where he taught in Bangkok. It was one of the major cremation monasteries in the city. And especially on Saturday evenings, there wouldn’t be many people to come and see him. Most of the people who wanted to see him had come during the day. So he’d go out and walk around the monastery. One evening he came back from his walk. He said, “You know, the number of people who die and still hang around their bodies is really high.” You wonder what he saw. But why is that? People are really attached to their bodies. They can’t think of leaving the body. They identify so strongly with the body. So this is why the contemplation of the body is a good exercise. At the very least, you won’t be hanging around in a miserable place like that just sort of hanging around a corpse. It’s no place to be. That’s what this body is going to become. It’s going to become a corpse someday. So learn how not to hang around it now, how not to be attached to it now. Use it, especially focus on the body. Focus on the breath. That’s a means for getting past your attachment to sensuality. But then also learn how to get beyond being attached to the body. You can develop a sense of space around the body, through the body, that helps you with this perception that you don’t really need this physical body in order to be aware. You feel more comfortable not latched onto a body. It’s in this way that you prepare yourself. So as the Jhans are fond of saying, when we practice meditation, we’re practicing how to die well. The skills that we’ll need at that point are the skills of being mindful, of learning how not to go for distractions, of learning how to stay firm in our intention and not be afraid. Those are skills that serve us well as we’re living and serve us well as we’re about die.

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